

Deep-Dive: Why Suffering?

A stand-alone session; usable in any order after the core study

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Scripture's deepest answers to suffering are not explanations but presences: God answers Job with himself, enters suffering in Christ, prays the lament psalm from the Cross, and promises its abolition. The Catechism's own first word on the question is that no quick answer will suffice.

Catholic Touchstone: To the question of evil, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice; only the whole of Christian faith is an answer, and God illuminates the mystery in his Son, who died and rose to vanquish evil (CCC 309, 324).

HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Someone in the room is carrying a live grief, whether you know it or not. Three commitments:

- No one's wound becomes a debate exhibit tonight. If a real loss surfaces, the philosophical thread stops and the group simply keeps company. You can return to the outline; you cannot return to a person you handled cheaply.
- Notice Job 2:13: his friends sat with him on the ground seven days and no one spoke a word. They were at their best in silence and at their worst once they started explaining. Order your evening accordingly.
- Never say, everything happens for a reason, and gently retire the phrase if someone else offers it. Romans 8:28 is a promise that God works in everything, not a claim that everything is secretly fine.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

State the objection at full strength in both its forms. The classical logical form: if God is all-good he would want to prevent suffering, and if all-powerful he could; suffering exists; therefore no such God. And the stronger modern evidential form: the world holds suffering that appears gratuitous in scale and distribution, and apparent gratuitousness is evidence against a God with morally sufficient reasons, even granting we may not be positioned to see all such reasons. And know that for most people the argument is a wound wearing logic as clothing: they are not asking about the compossibility of divine attributes; they are asking about a diagnosis, a grave, a childhood. The session must answer both registers without confusing them.

On the intellectual register, be honest about what the Church claims and does not. She teaches that God is not evil's author, that moral evil entered a good creation through creaturely freedom, which God permits because he respects that freedom and knows how to bring good from it (CCC 311, quoting St. Augustine), while physical evil belongs to a creation still journeying toward its intended perfection (CCC 310); and that evil itself has no positive existence of its own but is a privation, a wound in the good. What she does not offer, and forbids us to counterfeit, is a tidy accounting of any particular suffering. CCC 309 says so in as many words: no quick answer will suffice; only the whole of the faith, taken together, answers.

On the personal register, the Christian claim is stranger and stronger than an explanation: God's fullest answer to suffering was to enter it. The eternal Son took a body that could be scourged, and from the Cross prayed the opening line of Psalm 22, Israel's own lament, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me. The complaint this study honored in Session 1 turns out to be a prayer God incarnate chose for himself. Christianity does not answer Job with a syllogism. It answers him with a fellow sufferer who is also the LORD who spoke from the whirlwind, and with an empty tomb, and with the promise that the wiping away of every tear is on the last page.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Job is the Old Testament's masterwork on the question, and its structure is the lesson: chapter after chapter of protest that God finally declares more right than the friends' pious explanations (Job 42:7), even while interrogating and humbling Job himself, answered not with case-reasons but with the whirlwind speech, an overwhelming tour of a creation Job did not make and cannot fathom. Job's response is the hinge: I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. The encounter, not the explanation, is what changes him. Joseph's summary of his own betrayal (you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, Genesis 50:20) and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 carry the arc forward: the New Testament reads both as converging on the Cross, where the worst evil ever done becomes the hinge of the greatest good ever given.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

The Catechism itself quotes St. Augustine (*Enchiridion*) at CCC 311, in substance: almighty God, because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works unless he were so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself. St. Augustine also teaches, in substance, that evil is not a created thing but a privation, a corruption of good, which is why it can wound everything and explain nothing.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II

St. John Paul II teaches, in substance, in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* that human suffering, united to Christ's, is taken up into his redemptive work: the sufferer is not merely a victim of the mystery of evil but can become, in Christ, a participant in the mystery of redemption. Suffering is never good in itself; joined to the Cross, it is never wasted.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

In the final manuscript of *Story of a Soul*, St. Thérèse describes the trial of faith that filled her last eighteen months: a thick darkness in which the thought of heaven, once her joy, became a source of struggle, and she chose, as she put it in substance, to sit at the table of unbelievers and eat their bread of sorrow, offering the darkness for them. A Doctor of the Church spent her dying months inside the very night this session's seekers know, and turned it into intercession.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 309:** To the question of evil, no quick answer will suffice; only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer. Memorize this paragraph's humility; it is your license to refuse tidy answers.
- **CCC 311:** God permits evil, mysteriously, because he can bring good from it; the paragraph quotes St. Augustine's *Enchiridion*.

- **CCC 312:** From the greatest moral evil ever committed, the murder of God's Son, God brought the greatest of goods; the paragraph cites Joseph's words in Genesis 50:20.
- **CCC 324:** God's permission of evil is a mystery that God illuminates by his Son, Jesus Christ, who died and rose to vanquish evil.
- **CCC 1505:** On the Cross, Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the sin of the world, of which illness is only a consequence; he gives suffering a new meaning: it can configure us to him.

SESSION GOALS

1. State the problem of evil at full classical strength and honor its wound register as well as its logic register.
2. Let the group discover Job's structure: protest honored, explanation withheld, presence given.
3. Present the Cross as God's entry into suffering, praying the lament himself.
4. Hold CCC 309's honesty: no tidy accounting of particular sufferings, and no glib use of Romans 8:28.

TIME NOTE

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Isaiah 53 discovery, folding it into the Cross discussion, then trim the Dig Deeper. Do not cut Job or Matthew 27:46. If a live grief opens mid-session, cut anything; the outline serves the room, not the reverse.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Leader prays: God, tonight's question has been prayed at you, shouted at you, and wept at you for as long as there have been people. You put the shouting in your own book, so we will not pretend to be calmer than the psalms. Be here, especially for whoever brought tonight's question in from their real life. Amen.

WIN

5. Without needing details: has the problem of suffering ever been more than a philosophy question for you? What did the people around you do that helped, or made it worse?
6. When someone is hurting, what do you instinctively reach for: explanations, distractions, presence, or silence? Which have you been grateful to receive?

BUILD

Leader, present the objection at full strength. Read slowly: If God is all-good, he would want to prevent suffering. If he is all-powerful, he could. Suffering exists, oceans of it, and much of it lands on the innocent. Therefore the all-good, all-powerful God does not exist. And its sharper modern edge: even if some suffering could serve purposes, so much of it looks gratuitous, pointless in amount and in where it lands, that the pointlessness itself is evidence. And for many people the argument has a face and a date attached.

- 3. Before any answer: what does this argument get right about goodness? What would we think of a human father with power to stop his child's agony who stood by?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Concede the force fully; the argument's picture of goodness is drawn from something true. Then set the evening's method: Christianity's response is not a counter-syllogism, and the Catechism says so in its own voice: to this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice (CCC 309). Tonight we watch what God actually does with the question when it is put to him, twice: once by Job, once on a cross.

Live discovery. Find Job 38:1-7, the beginning of God's answer, and then Job 42:1-6, Job's response. Read both aloud.

- 4. Job demanded an explanation chapter after chapter. What does God actually give him, and what does Job say it did?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

God gives no accounting of Job's case: he gives the whirlwind, a first-person revelation of wisdom and governance over a creation Job neither made nor comprehends, which is to say, he gives himself. And Job: *"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you"* (Job 42:5). The encounter does what no explanation did. Add the detail almost no one expects: at 42:7 God declares that Job, the protester, spoke rightly of him, unlike the friends with their tidy theology; and yet the same speeches interrogate and humble Job himself, who repents in dust and ashes (42:6). The Bible's longest treatment of suffering receives the honest protester, corrects him face to face, and rebukes the explainers: the complaint has a home, and it is not the last word.

Live discovery. Find Matthew 27:45-46. Read it aloud, and then find the line's source: Psalm 22:1.

- 5. What is Jesus doing with his dying breath, and where do his words come from?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). He is praying, and the prayer is Psalm 22, Israel's great lament, prayed from inside the worst that evil does. The Christian claim is not that God watches suffering from a safe distance and has reasons. It is that God entered it: body, betrayal, injustice, agony, death. Whatever else is said tonight, this cannot be unsaid: the question, why have you forsaken me, has been prayed by Jesus, the eternal Son made man, to the Father, from inside real human suffering, on behalf of everyone who has ever prayed it since. Note also where Psalm 22 goes if you keep reading: from dereliction into vindication; Christians have long heard his citation in light of that turn.

Reason, then the Church's teaching. Now the intellectual register, honestly bounded. The Church teaches: God is not the author of evil; evil is not a thing he made but a privation, a wound in the good, entering through creaturely freedom. And the one sentence she offers about permission, she offers quoting St. Augustine (CCC 311): God would not allow any evil in his works unless he were so almighty and so good as to bring good even out of evil. Exhibit A is deliberate (CCC 312): from the murder of God's Son, the worst moral evil ever committed, came the redemption of the world. What the Church declines to provide is the line-item accounting: why this cancer, why that child; CCC 309's own words are that no quick answer will suffice, and the refusal of per-case accountings is the pastoral inference this guide draws from that humility. Any group member who has been handed a quick answer at a graveside knows the Catechism is right.

- 6. Genesis 50:20 gives Joseph's summary of his own betrayal: *"you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good."* Where is the line between trusting that, and saying the glib thing at the graveside? How would you keep the first without committing the second?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Draw out the difference of tense and speaker: Joseph says it years later, about his own suffering, from inside the rescue. It is testimony, not therapy imposed from outside on someone else's fresh wound. Romans 8:28 has the same shape: a promise that God is at work in everything for those who love him; not a claim that everything is fine or that the evil was secretly good. The good brought out of evil never makes the evil good. The Cross redeemed the world; it remains a murder.

Live discovery. Find Revelation 21:1-4. Read it aloud.

- 7. What does the last page of the Bible promise about tonight's subject, and who is doing the wiping?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more" (Revelation 21:4). Not, tears will evaporate: he will wipe them, the most parental gesture in Scripture, performed by God, individually. Christianity's final answer to suffering is not an explanation of it but the abolition of it, with the tears attended to personally on the way out. Suffering, on this account, is real, unexplained in its particulars, entered by God, and, for those redeemed in Christ, not ultimate: the new creation ends it. That is not everything a grieving heart wants. It is more than any other account on offer.

DIG DEEPER

If time allows: Isaiah 53, the Servant who was *"a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,"* read by the Church as the Cross in prophecy, and Romans 8:31-39, Paul's crescendo that nothing in all

creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, written by a man whose sufferings he lists elsewhere at length. He is not theorizing.

SEND

7. Who in your life is inside this question right now, and what would Job 2:13 presence, showing up and shutting up, look like from you this week?
8. If you have a grief you have only ever thought about God, what would it change to pray it at him instead, Psalm 22 style, with permission to be that honest?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Do one act of silent presence for a sufferer this week: show up, bring food, sit, and do not explain anything.
- Pray Psalm 22 once, aloud, all the way through, and notice where it turns.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.” Revelation 21:4

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader prays: Father, your Son prayed the lament from the Cross, so we know the lament is allowed. For every unexplained suffering represented in this room, we do not ask you tonight for the accounting you have not given. We ask you for what you gave Job: yourself. And we hold you to the last page: every tear, your hand. Amen.

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this deep-dive, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.

- **Job 38:1-7; 42:1-7** the whirlwind and Job's response; the protester declared right (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Matthew 27:45-46; Psalm 22** the lament prayed from the Cross (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Genesis 50:20** you meant evil; God meant it for good (discussion)
- **Romans 8:28** in everything God works for good with those who love him; handled against glib use (discussion)
- **Revelation 21:1-4** every tear wiped, by hand (live discovery; memory verse from v. 4)
- **Isaiah 53; Romans 8:31-39** the Man of Sorrows; nothing separates (Dig Deeper; first cut)
- **Job 2:13** seven days of silence (coach box and Send)

Catechism: CCC 309; 311 (quoting St. Augustine, Enchiridion); 312; 324; 1505.

Voices: St. Augustine, Enchiridion (as quoted at CCC 311); St. John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris (summary); St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Story of a Soul (summary).